

The idea first entered my mind when I saw the place. I thought myself mad. Surely they would catch me. Surely they would see me. Surely their agents would find me and bring me to justice. They see everything. They know everything. Their cameras are on day and night, watching and waiting. My every move would be studied. My every thought would be known. Every word I would write would be video recorded and triplicated.

Yet the idea would not leave me. I knew I was heading to death, and went anyway. For I realized that death is better than insanity. And I knew that I would go insane if I did not tell you, my unknown reader, my tale.

This place, this dark and musty and frightful place, I found while unloading stock in the back of the store. I was moving box after box after box, and then the box I moved presented this dark hole to me.

I was flabbergasted, to use that quixotic word of the Old Ones. I was staring into a seemingly endless cave, and my mind shouted to me to go on. Despite the obvious danger of my mind's advice, I went into the unknown place. A spider's web blocked the entrance, but it was no match for my fly swatter.

The entrance to this cave seemed to have been cut from so weird sort of metal gating. Yet I cannot image a tool that would accomplish such a task. It then occurred that this cave might have been cut during the Old Days, when Our Sam had been merely a man. It was whispered in the break rooms that Sam had been a mortal, and that The Store had been merely one out of many stores. I never believed the rumors. I could never imagine a time where stores other than The Store filled the streets. I could never imagine that such disorganization was ever possible.

I entered the black hole, paying extra attention not to cut myself on the odd cuts through the iron. Despite my best efforts, though, I scratched my forearm. I stared at the blood that was upwelling. I knew many of my neighbours have died from less. The Old Ones used to say that there was a time when such medical accidents were quite harmless. They say that there was a time when the doctors of the world had successfully replaced hearts and infused blood into patients.

The cave was earthen. I could see dead roots in the walls of the cave, roots that out-aged me, perhaps out-aged The Store. I crawled through the cave, feeling the walls on my journey. I cannot tell if the journey had been minutes or hours. I only know that by its end, I was exhausted.

When I reached the cave's end, I rested. I slept.

I dreamt of her again. We are standing on at the top of the world, she in my arms. We are standing victorious above some unknown foe. We are standing fully erect, full of confidence and pride. We own the night that surrounds us. We own the wind that brushed pass our faces. We own the moon that grants us his light. We own the sun that soon will reveal his face to the world. We are invincible.

I awoke. I suddenly realized where I was and what had transpired the previous night. My head at the entrance of the cave, I looked to either side of me. I saw no one in the crate area. I exited the cave. Looking at myself, I noticed no visible dirt on either my khaki pants or navy blue shirt. I left the crate area to go home, but glanced upon the Great Clock above the head of Our Sam. The Clock declared to the world that it was 0015. I had slept for barely three-quarters of a hour.

On the street outside the store, I looked up at the sky as I walked. The Old Ones claimed that there are stars up in the sky that shine with great intensity. They said that it was the smoke of Our Sam's great factories that blocked them from our view. Yet the Old Ones spoke of several things. Perhaps their inability to silence themselves is why Our Sam silenced them forever.

When I reached The Building, I climbed up to my suite, 101. The suite contained 100 rooms, with twenty on each floor. The building was brick and beige. The stairwells at the four corners of the cubic building bring the tenants to the upper floors. On the ground floor there is an elevator, but it has been broken since before my father was born.

My suite was modest. It had two rooms, the bathroom and the bedroom. The bedroom and bath room were of equal size, about 2 ½ metres by 2 ½ metres each.

My bedroom was painted white and yellow. My bed was a air mattress that lay upon the floor. It lacks any dressing but a pillow.

I removed my navy shirt and khakis and retrieved a navy shirt and khaki from my clothing rack. Our Sam discourages the use of the personal pronoun “my”, since it undermines our neighbours and The Store. Nothing is owned by any individual. Everything is the property of everyone.

I headed to the bathroom to shower. My bathroom is tiled grey. My shower's hot water knob is broken, as is my toilet. There is no mirror above the sink but only a mirror frame. Our Sam disapproves of mirrors. They create egotism amongst people. One should not care about oneself, only one's neighbours. In the shower, I wash myself in the ice cold water that trickles from the clogged shower head. In my bedroom, the alarum clock rings. “It's time to get up,” I think with a grin. I'll have to hope that the cameras did not catch that grin. Our Sam does not like grinning. It implies that we had had joy that was not our neighbours' joy. Our Sam wishes us to be happy, but only in a way that can benefit our neighbours.

Was the world always like this? Have men always lived for one another. Had Our Sam lived for his neighbours? How could his store exist if he did not have self-joy? I left such philosophy for another time and dressed myself in the khakis and navy shirt. I headed out the door of my suite. On the street, I had an inexplicable urge to smile. I suppressed it, however. I did not wish Our Sam's street cameras to pick up any sign of anything awry.

I entered the store and grabbed a quick bite to eat at The People's Diner. This once was where the Old Ones, those too old for work, used to gather. Here they spoke of the times before the Store, before Our Sam. And Here were they silenced.

After my meal, I headed to the break room. Each shift is begun with a Our Sam cheer. Each shift worker shouts out of the Great Letters and all shout out the Great Name. Sometimes, I think that this is a bit like what the Old Ones used to call “church” on those late and long nights when I would listen to them speak of their old lives, their lives before the Great Revolution. They spoke of how they would go to these “churches” and proclaim the glory of “God” and “Jesus”. They spoke of “suits” they wore to the churches, and the “dresses” their women would wear. Of course my thought is heresy. Our Sam abolished the old and false religions long ago.

TO BE CONTINUED

After the cheer, I went back to my work. I unpack incoming crate from the Office. I work in the labyrinths of the Store. My work affords me much time to think. Perhaps this is why I am different. Perhaps this is why I am unlike my neighbours. Perhaps this is why I am unable to sacrifice myself to the whole.

Many times, working in the dark, I realize that I am merely a gear in the Great Machine. The Great Machine roars and roars, and if it should stop, it is repaired. The malfunctioning piece is removed and replaced with a new part. I am malfunctioning. Soon the Great Repairman will come, and I will be tossed away.

I cannot discuss these thoughts with my neighbours, for independent thought is forbidden. What one alone thinks is wrong. Truth is created by numbers. What the masses hold to be true is true. To quote a long forgotten book, insanity is a minority of one.

Then I am insane. This, however, is not the startling revelation. The startling revelation is that I don't care. I don't wish to be cured of my disease. I relish my illness. It is virtuous to be insane.

I ask you, my unknown and unseen reader. Is what I am writing so odd? Are you like me, an outcast of the Machine? Do you refuse to give yourself to the Greater Good? Do you exist? Or are the pages of this journal being used as fire fodder in the wastes of society? Am I just wasting my time?

My work passes as it always does: slowly. Seconds turn to minutes, minutes to hours. The

beats of my heart seem days apart. Every box I lift sends pain shooting to every part of my body. By days end, I simply wish to drop dead so I can feel no more.

At the end of the shift, I came here to my private sanctuary to think. In this dark place, I know no fear. I thought of many things. I thought of the "stars" that once shone upon men. I thought of the Old Ones who lived during the Old Days. I thought of one in particular.

His name was Randy, or so he told me. His hair was white and in disarray. He was incredibly lucid for being an Old One. Once, he told me that he was 52. I didn't believe him at the time. Men do not live so long. The man who lives to be 33 counts himself blessed.

He was born during the times when men had names to distinguish themselves from their brothers. He lived in what he called "Noo Oar-Leans". He had worked for years as a schoolteacher, educating the children of the poor. After the Great Revolution, schools were done away with, and Randy found himself without work.

He told me that at first, he refused to work at The Store. He said that he had too much "integrity" to work here. However, as one cannot eat integrity, he came to work here, hating himself every day of his life.

He and I had something in common. We were thinking men. That is my real transgression. Not the sneaking and the lying and the grinning. My Great Transgression is thought. This is Original Sin. From this sin are born all others. When I am discovered, I will be killed.

I do not care for my mortal body, however. I do not care about death any longer. In fact, I wish for it. I wish for death to come and extinguish the fire of my mind.

This journal, however, must come to no harm. This journal is the culmination of my life. This is my message to generations from now. This is my shout to the future to recant and change course. This is my call to every man, woman, and child who still has a mind to put their effort to destroying the Great Machine, the Great Moloch which devours men.

Looking back upon these pages, I realize that I have not told you my name. In the days of old, men were named after great men. Names were the mark of individuality. The days of the individual are gone.

Now, we are identified merely by hexadecimal numerals. I am 3316124. To be more precise, this is the number of the position I hold at this particular Store. Upon my death, anyone who replaces me becomes 3316124. The individual is only a cell of the organism.

I am 23 years old. I was born in year 2 of the Great Revolution. In the early years of the Revolution, children were still raised by their parents. As such, I was raised by my mother and father.

My parents were loyal. They were unlike me. They praised Our Sam and loved the Machine of the Store. They performed the cheers with genuine joy and love. They were unthinkers.

It was from my father that I inherited this job. He spent his last days on earth teaching me this job, hopeful that my service to Our Sam would out shine even his. He died happy with the thought that I would be a humble servant of my neighbours.

That must be how I have avoided detection. My parents' orthodoxy must have made them blind to my blatant unorthodoxy. Their eyes will be opened however. What will happen then, only Our Sam knows.

TO BE CONTINUED.

I have seen her, the woman of my dreams. The woman whose hairs of gold haunt mine waking hours. The woman whose eyes of blue have stared deeply into my own during my peaceful nights. Whose smile has made my life worth living. Her name is 157205.

I have spent these last three days denying the knowledge that I knew from the moment of seeing her. I have wrestled with myself, trying to suppress the truth, to force it into submission. The truth will not die, however.

It is wrong to feel such a way about a single person. Everyone belongs to everyone else. Each of us exists for the sake of our neighbours. So it has been told to us since the beginning, and so it is true.

Yet I want her to myself. I want no one else to have her. I want no one else to see her or gain pleasure at the sight of her. I want no one else to know her. I want her to be mine and mine only.

Randy, a month or two prior his death, told me of a woman he knew. He described her through the sole use of superlatives. He told me of his inner desire to hide her from the world.

"That's rather selfish of you," I said to this. His answer was a single shrug.

He then detailed her death due to what he called a "drunk driver". It was her death that made him lose his zest for life. It was her death that made him sell his soul to the Great Machine.

Love is what he called it. He meant it, however, in a different way than Our Sam means. Our Sam decrees that we must love our neighbours. Sam decrees that we must love the store and our work to improve it for the good of mankind. The loving act is scheduled for every other weekend, and lovers are assigned by lottery.

Randy used to speak of his "heart". Yet he did not refer to the life-granting blood-pumping organ within each of us. He was talking of something less definite, less concrete. Perhaps talking of such things is why Our Sam silenced him.

I see her nearly everyday now, and it is torture. It, however, is glorious torture. I would give up this pain for nothing in the world.

Randy once told me of a peculiar saying which was popular in his youth. When ever someone loved someone else, he said that he had butterflies in his stomach. I thought the concept funny at the time. Think it! Undigested butterflies swarming about in one's stomach. Madness! Now it no longer seems so comical. Now, I know this feeling with great intimacy.

I asked Randy once what love was, exactly. He couldn't answer me. He told me that there were no words in the English language to describe love. He told me the best poets of the world couldn't even scratch the surface of the great concept of love.

Perhaps I know now what love is. Perhaps love is peace. Perhaps love is the knowledge that the world is a little bit brighter because of her.

If so, then I love her. If so, I love her with all of my heart, body, and soul. I feel like shouting it from the rooftops. I feel like proclaiming it to the world. I feel like that nothing can harm me any longer, for 157205 is in the world.

Perhaps, she will be assigned to me. Perhaps whatever god the Old Ones worshiped will smile upon me. If that day ever comes, perhaps I will show her this journal, my autobiography, my letter to you, my unseen reader. For she has a look of a co-conspirator in her eyes.

TO BE CONTINUED

I love you.

TO BE CONTINUED

I came to my notebook and saw the words written there. First, I believed I imagined them. I believed that my hope made me see writing that was not there. Only after half an hour could I believe that the words were real.

Is it she? Has she written these words in my journal? The idea is madness. How can *she* love me? How can such an awesome creature love a miserable wretch like myself?

I sat in my secret place, contemplating what to do? Should I be so bold as to simply ask her? Perhaps she is an agent of Sam and will send me to my end. Perhaps I will find out that it was she who wrote those words but wishes to recant.

There is a possibility even more likely than these, however. Perhaps she does love me as I love her. Perhaps she does care for me as I care for her. Perhaps happiness is possible in this world. I must try. I must see her. Damn all the cameras in the world. I must see her.

She does! She does! She does love me! I feel great. I feel exalted. I feel as if nothing in the world can touch me or worry me now. For the first time in my life, I feel happy.

Such an odd emotion, happiness. Randy told me that there was a time when men were happy nearly always. He told me that there was a time when happiness was the primary emotion of man. What a time that must have been!

I hunted and hunted for her. I searched all of the departments of the Store. I started panicking. Perhaps Our Sam had found her! Perhaps Our Sam had captured her!

I found her, finally, in the lounge. She sat at a table, eating a sandwich. She was looking upon me, knowing what it was that I was about to ask her.

"Was it you?" I asked her silently, carefully, maniacally.

Grinning, she nodded. I grinned also. It was contagious. Her smile has the ability to heat up the coldest of hearts.

That nod sent my heart pounding. My mind raced with the possibilities! We could escape. We could just meet one day and leave. We could go as far as our legs could take us. We could "get married", as Randy called it. We could be free, she and I, to plot our own destiny.

Then reality sunk in. We would not run. We would not get married. Sam would surely catch us. He would surely kill us. I cannot bear the thought of 157205 being dead. I cannot bear the thought of my being dead. I am too happy to die.

It has been days since that encounter. I have searched and searched, but I have not seen 157205 at all. My heart aches at her absence. Sometimes, I think that Our Sam has captured her. But I know that to be false. Our 157205 is too clever for Our Sam. She has escaped. She is waiting just outside the city for me to join her. We are going to run, We are going to be free...

...I hear a noise. It is the sound of my approaching doom. Our Sam has found me! He found me out! Our Sam has come to retrieve me. Our Sam has come to kill me. Yet the only one thought goes through my mind. I hope I will not see 157205 in the place that I am going.

TO BE CONTINUED.

He is across from me. His hair, short and white, is meticulously trimmed. His nails are trimmed to perfection. His eyes are a deep blue. He wears a blue vest, as any common worker from The Store, but his is far cleaner. He wears the uniform navy shirt and khaki pants, but he wears them as if he were making a point to wear them.

He is sitting at the table's head. He is speaking. He is real. He: Our Sam. For so long I have doubted his existence. For so long I have dismissed him as an invention of the Store's upper management. Why? Why was it so hard to believe that he was real and physical?

"It is the natural state for man to serve others. This is what we were built for. We are servants of our neighbours. They define our value and worth. If they find us worthless, then we cease to exist. The greatest of men are but slaves of their brothers."

He continued to speak for some time. It must have been days that he spoke of the great virtue of self-sacrifice. I couldn't hear him, however. I could not concentrate upon anything in the room for more than a few moments. I felt drunk. I felt as I had been drugged. Everything I gazed upon seemed monstrous, horrid. Everything, it seemed, wanted to devour me alive.

Yet only one thought repeated itself in my mind. "She is safe." "She is safe."

I have not seen her. When I first entered the dirty holding room they threw me in, I searched the masses there for her. I did not see her. When the innumerable names were shouted on the PA system, declaring them enemies of prosperity, brotherhood, and of Our Sam, I did not hear hers. When they sent me to their torture chambers to extract information from me, they asked me no questions about her.

Somehow, they didn't realize she existed. They didn't realize that she was unorthodox. They didn't realize that she was as much a criminal as I, if not more so. Our 157205 is clever. Much too clever for the likes of Our Sam.

The fog of my mind cleared with an electric shock. I looked up. Our Sam stood above us, grimacing. He slapped me several times, but I was too numb to feel any pain. "Listen to me!" he shouted at me. "Listen to me, damn you! I am imparting great truths!" I could not help but grin.

I always had imagined Our Sam as an imposing man. I had thought of him as a giant, able to kill men merely by giving them a hateful glare. I had imagined him as a man who would never be ignored. I had imagined him as one who would never need to command others to listen to him.

I slept. It seemed as if I slept for years. When I awoke, Our Sam was standing above me. His lip was snarled, but his voice seemed almost gleeful. "You are a plague," he was telling me. "You are a plague, and like any plague, we must dispose of you. We must dispose of you before you spread. You will not leave here alive."

Then, with a chuckle, he added, "I give you my guarantee!"

BANG! The sound of the gunshot echoed throughout the halls.

TO BE CONTINUED

At that moment, Our Sam put his hands to his face. He fell over. With the blood spreading from him, I knew he was dead.

I looked in the hole in the back of his head. I saw an odd assortment of wire and circuitry. Lights blinked inside that cavity for a few seconds before they realized that Sam was dead. What did this mean?

Before I had a chance to think about this, I was being jerked by 157205. In her other hand, she was holding a pistol. It had been at least 17 years since I had seen a firearm of any sort. Our Sam had forbidden them.

157205 smiled at me. I smiled at her. All of my worries melted away upon gazing at that smile. With a gesture of her hand, she bid me follow her.

We ran through the store. Flames engulfed everything. The smell of burning paper filled the air. I smelt foodstuffs burn and clothes burn and oppression burn. I smelt the scent of liberty. If only Randy were alive to see this.

We headed near one of the exits, but our way was blocked by fire. 157205 pulled me towards another of the doors. As we exited the Store, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders.

She and I headed for the rooftop of the Building. It seemed like we climbed forever up those iron stairs. When we were at the top, we looked down upon the Store. For as long as I live, I will not forget that beautiful sight. The red of fire stood against the black of night.

We noticed others were gazing upon the flames. Mother, Father, and Child looked as everything they ever knew was destroyed. Yet they were happy. For even they could sense the change in the air. They could sense the coming of freedom. All of the workers of Store #906 looked upon the flames and tasted liberty.

The fires spread to other Stores all other the land. One could see red in the sky, no matter what hour of the day. Freedom spread like a plague, and in the following weeks, the Machine was destroyed.

The Old Ones used to say that fire purified. Let's hope that they were right.

THE END.